

## **Allusions in *Heart of Darkness*: Decoding Joseph Conrad's Commentary on Colonialism**

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**Abstract** This article provides in-depth research and analysis of the role of allusions in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Through a close reading of Conrad's text, the study illuminates how these allusions challenge dominant narratives of European superiority and progress, underscoring the ironic and absurd nature of colonialism. It asserts that these allusions serve to underscore a range of themes inherent in the colonial enterprise, including Eurocentric perspectives, aimlessness, disillusionment, fear, and violence. The research concludes that Conrad's intricate use of allusions offers a powerful tool for social and political commentary and critique of colonialism.

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### **Introduction**

Attacked as racist by Third World critics such as Chinua Achebe and the inspiration for Coppola to depict the collapse of American imperialism in Vietnam, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a literary masterpiece that has captured the imagination of readers for over a century. One of the striking features of Conrad's writing is his use of allusions, which adds complexity and depth to the text. Through the skillful use of allusions, the author offers a multi-layered commentary on colonialism and imperialism, the themes that shaped the world during his time. Colonialism is a recurring subject in *Heart of Darkness*. According to the story, Europeans sought to conquer African nations in order to civilize their people. They perceived Africa as dark, but they got there and further deepened and expanded the darkness.

Conrad conveyed his viewpoint through Charles Marlow, the main protagonist and narrator of the novella, who reminisces about his journey along the Congo River to meet the mysterious and enigmatic Kurtz, an ivory trader. Marlow tries to hide the evil deeds of white people in Africa. Colonists perceive themselves as the ones to set

examples for black people since they see colonized people as other, different, and inferior to the point of being less than completely human (Tyson, 2006). The malicious side of Europeans, which divides the world into two distinct parts—the civilized, or “us,” and the barbaric, or “them,” is revealed at the end of the novella (Brannigan, 1998). Marlow serves a company that collects, trades, and sells ivory. According to Bloom (2009), Europeans violate European rules, and their morality deteriorates. The area where Europe and Africa meet in *Heart of Darkness* demonstrates the meaninglessness of colonialism's morality (Hasan, 2020).

### **Methods**

The research methods employed in this study involve a qualitative approach, with a focus on the textual analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The novella serves as the primary data source for this research. Textual analysis will be applied to examine and identify the various allusions in the story. A close reading of the text is conducted to identify and compile a list of allusions, documenting their context and type. The identified allusions are then interpreted and analyzed in relation to their importance, symbolism, and

implications within the context of the novella. This includes examining how these allusions relate to overarching themes and provide an insightful commentary on colonialism and Imperialism. Ethical considerations are maintained throughout the study procedure, with proper acknowledgment and citation of original materials.

## Results

### History: The Mirror of Colonial Corruption

*Heart of Darkness* begins with Charles Marlow, the narrator, and protagonist, describing the sun sinking over the Thames River and the ensuing darkness that descended upon London. Looking out across the river, he muses on its significance in English history and imperial might, alluding to two of the country's most renowned explorers, Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin (Conrad, 2007). The heritage of European conquest and colonialism is symbolized by Sir Francis Drake, the English adventurer and naval commander who circumnavigated the world. This allusion demonstrates the Eurocentric worldview that hailed European explorers while demeaning non-Western cultures. The mention of Sir John Franklin refers to the hardships of discovery and the risks involved with heading into uncharted territory. It serves as a reminder that imperial expeditions frequently ended in misery and loss, not just for the explorers themselves but also for the native communities that were negatively impacted by colonization. By including a reference to a failed expedition, Conrad questions the idealized perception of heroic exploration and highlights the risks and constraints of Western expeditions.

The Romans are addressed in Conrad's novella as a further example of how history repeats itself. European explorers, like the Romans, ventured into the unknown. Conrad's depiction of the Roman commander's experience with unknown territory recalls subsequent colonial encounters in Africa (Conrad, 2007). The Romans, navigating through treacherous terrain, reflect the explorers' risk and ambition, providing a stark counterpoint to the idealized notion of conquest. The allusion to the Romans depicts a historical collision between two

distinct cultures: the Roman invaders and the native inhabitants of the represented territory. It might be interpreted as a metaphor for the complicated process of cultural interchange and modification that happens through colonization. It implies that both the colonizers and the colonized are impacted and altered by their experiences.

Ravenna, an Italian city notable for its art and culture, appears in the story as a symbol of civilization and progress. The reference to Ravenna occurs while Marlow, the main character, is thinking about the personalities and motives of the men who went into the African Congo (Conrad, 2007). Marlow contends that one of the reasons they were able to survive in the hostile and enigmatic Congo was the possibility of advancement to the fleet at Ravenna. Individuals are ready to suffer the terrible conditions and moral compromises of the colonial endeavor in pursuit of personal riches and status, reflecting the issue of imperialism and the corrupting effect of power.

The allusion to pilgrims is employed to convey a sense of aimlessness, recklessness, and disappointment. Charles Marlow describes seeing a station where men are walking aimlessly in the yard's sunshine, clutching long staves (Conrad, 2007). In this context, the reference to pilgrims emphasizes the sarcastic and ludicrous nature of the men's actions and their association with the colonial endeavor. In this setting, staves, which have historically been associated with pilgrims as aids to support or symbols of their spiritual journey, become absurd and worthless. Conrad questions conventional myths of European dominance and development. The pilgrims' faithlessness and lack of direction represent an erosion of their humanity in the pursuit of power and fortune.

### The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: Fictional Reality

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow mentions the ISSSC, which had entrusted Kurtz, the ivory trader, with the task of preparing a report for its future directions. The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs is a fictional entity that mirrors the real-life International Association

for the Exploration and Civilizing of Africa led by King Leopold II. The author emphasizes the Eurocentric worldview common throughout the age of European colonialism by referring to this arrangement. It emphasizes the colonial project's self-assigned role in repressing the habits and customs of non-European civilizations, depicting them as "savage" and in need of European intervention. Conrad highlights the colonial hypocrisy and the pretense of moral rectitude by referring to the fictitious institution. The inconsistency and moral bankruptcy of colonial ideologies are revealed by the contrast between the European conquerors' stated goal of eradicating "savage customs" and their actual behavior.

### **Biblical Irony: Unmasking Colonial Hypocrisy**

Conrad's use of Biblical allusions provides a dimension of irony and critique to the narrative. The term "whited sepulchre," referring to a passage from the Bible, serves as a scathing commentary on European civilization (Conrad, 2007, p.14). Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, comparing them to tombs that appear clean and beautiful on the outside but are riddled with filth and decay on the inside. Conrad's reference to the city of Brussels as a "whited sepulchre" has a similar intent. It implies that while Brussels appears respectable and organized on the surface, it is filled with moral corruption, death, and decay under the surface. This allusion successfully contradicts the prevailing colonial narrative. Colonialism was portrayed by Europeans as a "civilizing mission," bringing development and knowledge to "uncivilized" regions. But, through the allusion, Conrad presents European culture as morally bankrupt, a "whited sepulchre" — beautiful on the exterior but packed with rot and filth on the inside.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the allusion to the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is given new meaning. Marlow recalls the moment when the Eldorado Exploring Expedition passes through one of the stations where he stops (Conrad, 2007). The European explorers, represented by the men on donkeys, evoke images of the arrival of Jesus. This allusion is used as a literary device to emphasize the

satirical and warped nature of the novella's colonial project. The Biblical account describes Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on a donkey as a moment of triumph and devotion. The donkey represents humility and peace, and the crowds' reaction to Jesus is one of reverence and astonishment. In the context of *Heart of Darkness*, the allusion to Jesus' entry on a donkey is used to draw a parallel with the arrival of the white men in the colonial setting. However, this parallel serves to highlight the irony and inversion of values in the colonial enterprise. Instead of Jesus, who symbolizes peace and humility, the white men approach on donkeys, which now signify power and exploitation. The men's new attire and tan shoes reflect their affluent status and remoteness from the local people's realities and misery.

### **The Greek Fates and The God of Power**

*Heart of Darkness* contains a mythological allusion to the Fates, also known as the Moirés or the Three Sisters, who ruled the fate of gods and men. In the text, the two women knitting black wool correspond to the Fates' labor of spinning the thread of existence (Conrad, 2007). The black wool might symbolize darkness, death, and the eventual end. Knitting implies the weaving of fate and the unstoppable flow of time. The reference to the Fates conveys a feeling of impending doom, the fragility of life, and the lack of control humans have over their own fate. The presence of the Fates reflects a larger accusation of the colonial regimes' deterministic worldview. It challenges the concept that colonial people have little control over their life and highlights their resistance to this narrative. The presence of two women, one overweight and the other slender, illustrates the variety and universality of colonial enslavement. The women represent different body types, implying that the impact of colonialism affects people of many origins and identities. Their shared task of knitting black wool symbolizes a collective struggle against colonial oppression.

Conrad, compares Kurtz, an ivory trader who has established himself as a revered figure among the Africans, to Jupiter, the ruler of the gods

and the bearer of thunderbolts in Roman mythology, representing strength, authority, and control. (Conrad, 2007). The usage of the phrase “thunderbolts” to describe Kurtz’s firearms contributes to the similarities between Jupiter and Kurtz. Thunderbolts are synonymous with heavenly retribution and devastation, and they represent Kurtz’s overwhelming authority over others. It suggests that Kurtz, like Jupiter, is capable of imposing his will and dominating people around him with violence and intimidation. The description of Jupiter as “pitiful” adds sarcasm and judgment. While Jupiter is commonly depicted as a beautiful and awe-inspiring deity, the term “pitiful” implies a sad demise or corruption. It means that Kurtz’s use of power and authority has deteriorated to a sorrowful stage, devoid of a moral or ethical foundation. The reference to Jupiter in connection to Kurtz emphasizes the concept of dehumanization and the loss of moral restraint in the midst of darkness. It emphasizes the concept that when people are given unlimited power and become disconnected from societal norms and responsibilities, they might morph into tyrannical characters like gods, capable of enormous generosity but also horrific cruelty. Kurtz epitomizes colonial tyranny, wielding power with a callous disdain for human life and decency. The parallel to Jupiter emphasizes the inherent power imbalance in colonial relationships, as well as the disastrous repercussions of untamed imperialistic aspirations.

### **A Hollow Round Table**

“When annoyed at mealtimes by the constant quarrels of the white men about precedence, he ordered an immense round table to be made, for which a special house had to be built” (Conrad, 2007, p.14). Charles Marlowe witnesses the arguments among the white men over the arrangement of the round table. The legend of King Arthur and The Round Table is a famous feature of British mythology and literature. According to mythology, King Arthur was a fictional British King who ruled during the early medieval era. The allusion to King Arthur and his Round Table in Conrad’s novella works as a literary technique to

illustrate the folly and conflict among the white colonialists. This reference draws a link between the idealized concepts of chivalry, honor, and unity connected with Arthurian legend and the sharp contrast of colonial reality. King Arthur’s Round Table represents equality and the absence of hierarchy in Arthurian mythology. It is shown as a gathering place for the knights to assemble as equals, with no one seated in a position of greater significance than others. The circular form of the table represents the lack of a head or end, stressing the concept of equality and cooperation. The round table ordered by the man in *Heart of Darkness*, likely a colonial figure, symbolizes a satirical attempt to replicate the ideals of King Arthur’s Round Table. This mimicry, however, is shallow, exposing the hypocrisy and discord among white males in the colonial environment. Their incessant disputes over precedence at mealtimes stand in sharp contrast to the Arthurian legend’s emblem of harmony and equality.

### **Papier-mâché Mephistopheles**

“I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe” (Conrad, 2007, p. 37). Charles Marlow depicts a figure he calls a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles,” and views this individual with skepticism and incredulity, implying that he is shallow. Mephistopheles is a literary character based on German legend, best known as a clever and manipulative devil in Goethe’s drama *Faust*. The mention of a malevolent character in German mythology and literature adds a symbolic element to the story. The character’s depiction as papier-mâché reinforces this point even further. Papier-mâché is a lightweight material manufactured from paper pulp and adhesive. The character portrays a colonial authority who appears powerful and authoritative but upon closer inspection is proven to be hollow and devoid of actual content. Through the description of the character as a papier-mâché Mephistopheles, Conrad challenges the perception of colonial figures as all-knowing, superior, and invincible.



### A Mirage of Wealth

“In a few days the Eldorado Expedition went into the patient wilderness, that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver. Long afterward the news came that all the donkeys were dead” (Conrad, 2007, p.43). The allusion to the Eldorado Expedition evokes thoughts of the fabled city of gold, which stands for the desire for prosperity and success. Eldorado depicts an unattainable and fanciful realm of enormous prosperity and plenty. In the context of *Heart of Darkness*, the reference indicates a comparable search for wealth in the African wilderness. It emphasizes the ephemeral nature of hopes and desires for worldly gain with the analogy to Eldorado. It implies that the quest for wealth might lead to a risky voyage into the unknown, ending in disappointment and loss. The allusion to Eldorado acts as a metaphor for the Western fantasy of money, power, exotic others, and conquest. It represents the colonial ethos of the European nations, which wanted to conquer and exploit resources in distant regions.

### Sleeping Beauty

“The approach to this Kurtz grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle” (Conrad, 2007, p.61). In order to emphasize the hazardous aspects of Kurtz’s condition in the African wilderness, the reference to *Sleeping Beauty* is used as a metaphorical comparison. *Sleeping Beauty* is a classic fairy tale in which a princess is bewitched by a spell and falls into a sound sleep until she gets awakened by true love’s kiss. Kurtz’s description as an enchanted sleeping princess highlights his fragility and the perils that surround him. By comparing Kurtz to a sleeping princess, Conrad conveys a sense of vulnerability and helplessness in the face of grave perils. This metaphor also emphasizes the sharp contrast between Kurtz’s apparent weakness and the brutal reality of the African desert. Kurtz’s presence in the bush might be understood as a form of enchantment or entrapment, as he is seduced by the attraction of ivory and power, just as *Sleeping Beauty*’s sleep is

the consequence of an enchantment. Furthermore, the reference to *Sleeping Beauty* might be read in terms of gender dynamics and power systems. *Sleeping Beauty* has usually been represented as a passive woman awaiting rescue, emphasizing women’s reliance on male intervention. The metaphor undermines the colonial narrative of European superiority and domination by connecting Kurtz, a man associated with strength and authority, to a submissive princess awaiting rescue.

### Mask of Absurdity

The Harlequin is referred to as the Russian sailor who has been Kurtz’s only companion for several months prior to the arrival of the steamboat. His clothes remind Marlow of a harlequin, a kind of clown. The author refers to the Russian sailor as Harlequin to evoke a particular image and create a sense of contrast and irony. Harlequin is a stock character from the traditional Italian *commedia dell’arte*, a form of improvisational theater. The character wears a distinctive costume of colorful patches and exhibits lively, mischievous behavior. Harlequin represents the absurdity and madness of the Congo. Furthermore, the reference to Harlequin might be seen as a reflection of imperialism’s dehumanizing consequences. As a fictitious figure, Harlequin signifies a distortion of reality and the blurring of lines between the actual and the staged. The narrator’s comparison of the Russian sailor to Harlequin may suggest that the sailor’s personality is diminished or overshadowed by the colonial gaze, turning him into a simple caricature or object of fun. The use of Harlequin as a moniker for the Russian sailor creates a juxtaposition between his playful manner and the story’s terror and brutality. The Russian’s warm and cheerful demeanor, as seen by his grin, contrasts with the harsh reality of colonialism and the crimes experienced by Marlow.

### Echo of Shakespeare

The phrase “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad, 2007, p.115) spoken by Kurtz echoes the last words of King Lear in Shakespeare’s tragedy. In the play, the titular character, King Lear, who has experienced a harrowing downfall and descent into madness, utters the words “Never, never, never,

never, never” (Shakespeare, 2015, p.259) before his death. Lear’s final words convey a profound sense of despair and hopelessness, reflecting the tragedy and futility of human existence. When Kurtz repeats the phrase “The horror! The horror!” before he dies, it signifies a similar sentiment. Kurtz became entangled in the Congo’s violent and oppressive atmosphere, where he witnessed and engaged in acts of severe brutality and exploitation. The repetition of the phrase underscores the magnitude of the horrors he has observed and perpetuated.

### Discussion

In conclusion, Conrad reveals the various layers of the colonial experience, displaying its ambiguities, moral deterioration, and tragic repercussions by effectively blending historical individuals, mythical characters, and literary references. Conrad’s use of these references transforms *Heart of Darkness* into a sophisticated examination of the human mind, cultural collision, and the quest for power. He creates a narrative that is both a vivid depiction of a specific moment in time and a timeless reflection on the universal themes of ambition, morality, and the cost of unrestrained domination. As these allusions resonate across the pages of the novella, they urge readers to explore the complicated terrain of colonialism, inviting meditation on the past and examination of its continuing consequences for the present and future. The exploration of allusions enriches our understanding by unveiling deeper layers of meaning and establishing connections between the narrative and broader historical and cultural themes. The allusions found in *Heart of Darkness* are not merely decorative or incidental elements; they are integral to the novella’s critical examination of colonialism. These allusions bring historical realities into the narrative, enhancing the text with layers of significance and offering a nuanced commentary on the power dynamics, injustices, and human costs associated with these systems.

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### Author’s Note



Natia Samadashvili is a recent graduate of the International Black Sea University in Tbilisi, Georgia, with a Bachelor’s Degree in English Philology. Her academic voyage has been enriched by a profound love for English literature. Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness

narratives, Shakespeare’s dramatic canvases, Conrad’s intricate psychological landscapes, and Eliot’s poetic meditations have collectively ignited her pursuit of literary enlightenment. With an insatiable appetite for exploring the intricate dimensions of language and storytelling, her journey promises to be an everlasting dance with the complexities of human expression and limitless imagination.